

May 12

Fr JOSEPH O'NEIL

23 October 1867 – 12 May 1952



Joseph O'Neil was born in Croyden, Surrey, England, and educated at Stonyhurst. The death of some of the students he knew by diphtheria, 'a serious bacterial infection that usually affects the mucous membranes of the nose and throat,' turned his mind to eternal things. He entered the Society in 1887. Illness led the doctors to recommend a drier climate and he went to St Aidan's in 1892. Even there it was not suitable and he went up to Vleeschfontein, and later Graaf-Reinet, in search of a climate that would help him. At one point he was given some water from the well at Lourdes and this cured him sufficiently for him to continue his studies. He did his theology at Dunbrody and was ordained in 1898.

All the while he was pursuing his interest in entomology and collecting specimens which he sent to museums in Britain and America. In 1898, Msgr Sykes started the Zimbabwe Mission Record and he soon asked O'Neil to take it over which he did for years. Fifteen of his articles - on entomology ('Some Interesting Beetles') are listed on his card in the archives. He also produced a Ndebele phrase book during his time at Empandeni and Embakwe, 1906-12, and later he wrote a Sindebele Grammar which was a standard work for decades.

When he moved to Mashona country, he studied Shona and again produced a Shona Grammar. He brought 'order, method and accuracy' to his language publications just as he did to his entomology articles.

His health was always a problem and again he moved 'to the sea' (Port Elizabeth?) where he gave retreats and visited the local people doing pastoral work among them.

In 1914, he became chaplain at Emerald Hill Children's Home and he stayed there for 23 years. He had a great gift with the children and they recognised his genuine interest in them. He also learnt painting and produced illustrations of butterflies and moths. A further activity was building a valuable collection of stamps.

In 1941, he moved to the House of Adoration, then in Borrowdale, and finally in 1944, to St John's School, Avondale.

He was clearly a man who was determined to push back against the ill health that dogged him all his life and his dates show he succeeded. He was 84 when he died!